

# **‘The Whole World is Stopping at WWW’**

## **An Analysis of how Norfolk Library and Information Services’ Surf’s Up can help close the digital divide amongst older people**

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## **Abstract:**

Despite increased accessibility to the internet and significant investment to encourage computer usage and access various initiatives, there is still a substantial portion, of older people in particular, that are not online. In 2010, Norfolk Library and Information Service (NLIS) received a grant from the BIG Lottery Fund to run a series of six-week computer courses entitled Surf's Up, for older people aged over 65, over a four year period. This study aims to describe and explain how Surf's Up impacted on a relatively small cohort - nineteen people - and the extent to which participation has helped to close the digital divide. The objectives are then to establish what parts of the course could be duplicated or modified to fit within the wider context of computer courses aimed at older people. Using a mixed method approach, using four different libraries and settings across Norfolk, feelings towards computers and attitudes about Surf's Up were gathered via a questionnaire at their first session, followed by a focus group at their final session. In the main, these participants were satisfied with their learning but most wanted further tutorials, feeling that they had more to learn and many were not completely confident to explore the internet on their own. For most, the key to getting online was a meaningful motivation, something that had importance in their own lives, such as emailing, talking to family members or watching programmes online. Though time-consuming, the qualitative data gathered proved a rich source of material by which to receive feedback. Although libraries have been instrumental in providing internet access and computer tuition, given cuts in public sector and libraries in particular, the viability of courses such as Surf's Up may be uncertain.

## Declaration and statements

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**Abbreviations**

AYL: Aylsham Library

ICT: Information and communication technologies

IT: Information technology

NLIS: Norfolk Library and Information Service

NML: Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library

NWA: North Walsham Library

STA: Stalham Library



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Research project background**

There is a striking dichotomy that has come to define the digital divide within the United Kingdom. As an increasing number of goods, services and government documents have moved online, there remain a significant proportion of older people over the age of sixty-five that continue to struggle to access the internet, much less online services and documents (Office for National Statistics, 2011). This is just one of the many aspects of the ever changing digital divide that impacts on a significant proportion of older people in the United Kingdom.

Norfolk Library and Information Service (NLIS) has sought to address this demographic division in internet skills through computer training courses in each of the forty-seven branch libraries across the county. In 2010, it received funding from the BIG Lottery Fund to coordinate and run a series of six-week courses, comprising of twelve hours of tuition, specifically targeting people over the age of sixty-five. The initiative became known as Surf's Up. As of September 2011, NLIS has finished its first year of the programme, with nearly 581 participants completing, well on the way of achieving its target of reaching out to 1,500 participants over four years.

### **1.2 Project aims**

As a requirement of the BIG Lottery, NLIS collects and analyses data that is being collected from the participants via a pre and post course questionnaire. This approach is somewhat limited, given that there is not a lot of scope for participants to further explain their own personal goals and frustrations regarding their learning. This study develops an alternative approach. It is an approach that seeks to give voice and clarify the experiences and perceptions of what the participants had experienced and speak with them directly regarding motivations, fears, what they had hoped to achieve. It was felt that this data would then be able to better describe and determine the needs of those impacted directly by the digital divide but also to contribute to the future shape and character of local policy and service provision. In that sense, this study aims to discover how the digital divide can be closed and to

what extent, if at all, a programme such as Surf's Up can provide a useful template for the acquisition of Internet skills within a public library setting.

### **1.3 Project objectives**

To enable the project aims to be filled, the following programme of data collection and review will occur:

- Identify four suitable Surf's Up courses in varied locations across NLIS and Norfolk in general
- Use the four courses' participants to gather data via a questionnaire and focus groups
- Analyse data from participants to better understand accomplishments and concerns regarding their course experience and internet usage in general
- Compare results to current research and policy and make suggestions regarding further courses and policy in general

### **1.4 Limitation of scope**

The participants in the research project were drawn from four different Surf's Up course groups. Though it was intended to get a mix of different urban and rural settings in various NLIS settings within Norfolk, groups were often limited by course start and ending dates during the author's period of data collection. As a result, participating libraries were often chosen because of their convenience with regards to timings rather than being a particularly rich data source. Having said that, the locales are representative of NLIS and Norfolk as a whole nonetheless.

### **1.5 Thesis structure**

The thesis begins with the literature review, an overview of current research regarding the digital divide, issues surrounding aspects of access, age-related computer issues, public libraries and quantitative versus qualitative data with respect to the digital divide. This is followed by the methodology chapter, which outlines the

process of creating and carrying out both quantitative and qualitative research within this project and the process of analysing the raw data from each respective method. The results chapter explains the outcomes from the data collection, first outlining that gathered from quantitative sources, followed by qualitative. It also begins to discuss some of the patterns that begin to emerge across the four separate focus groups. The discussion chapter compares the data collected to current research, such as basic skills, looking at issues of access, the digital divide, age-related problems, public libraries and the benefits of qualitative data in this area. Finally, the thesis concludes with an analysis and overview of the research project in the conclusion, via a review and reflection on the findings as well as considerations for the future.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

At a local level, it is hoped that the data collected via the Surf's Up participants through both quantitative and qualitative collection methods, when compared with current research, will demonstrate ways in which the Surf's Up courses and internet courses for older people in general can be improved. In a wider context, this data might be used to both inform current policies and programmes aimed at closing the digital divide concerning older people but add tacit value to the work of internet provision and availability and courses via the public library medium. In that sense, this research project aims to add further scope to the experience of older people initially learning about the internet and the World Wide Web but also suggest means in which they can be better targeted and served in their learning journey.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Access and the digital divide**

In order to analyse the impact of Surf's Up and its ability to help close the digital divide in Norfolk, it is imperative to better understand the issues surrounding the digital divide in the wider cultural context. What this means in practice is investigating the meaning of the digital divide in its different contexts, scrutinising potential solutions and their impact on older people, and understanding public libraries' role in future computer and internet improvements and projects.

The digital divide is a challenging phrase that refers to a complex range of problems and issues, impacting on a variety of different ages and people. Within the phrase is also a diverse and complicated quantity of social and economic divisions, and equally disparate solutions to 'closing' the divide. Confusingly, its meaning often changes, dependent on both the 'audience' one is speaking to or about as well as the context of where the divide is being discussed (Epstein, Nisbet & Gillespie, 2011). Grant (2007) proposes that a simple explanation of the digital divide is the chasm 'between those who have access to new technologies and those who do not', whereas Epstein, et al. (2011) argue that the meaning depends on one's interpretation of the importance of skills or access in using information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Definitions can also be expanded to include various meanings of 'access' in how people use technology but also 'perceived' or 'effective' access in how well individuals understand their ability to use technology. An overarching digital divide viewpoint, identifies the 'gaps domestically, along socioeconomic, geographic, educational, racial and gender lines' in ICT usage as a broad definition (Epstein, et al., 2011).

However it is defined, it impacts on a significant proportion of the British population. A HM Government Paper (2008) found that 17 million adults are not using the Internet (as cited in, Society of Chief Librarians (Wales), 2010) and Digital Britain estimates that 11.6 million people in the UK are 'digitally excluded' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009) or missing out socially, financially or otherwise because they do not have access or a presence online. Moreover, some

27% have no Internet connection and '6 million people aged over 65 have never used the web' (Asthana and McVeigh, 2010). Unsurprisingly, the National Audit Office (Pateman, 2007/2008) estimates that '75% of people counted as socially excluded are also digitally excluded'.

The reasons for non-usage vary, with access and finance being one issue and non-interest another (van Dijk, 2006, Eynon and Helsper, 2010). Ferro, Helbig and Gil-Garcia (2011) identify some of these non-users as either 'the laidback' or 'the needy'. 'The laidback,' although they may have the financial and intellectual capabilities to learn more about ICTs, 'do not have sufficient incentives to do so' or may not understand the 'perceived benefits' of going online. 'The needy' lack the 'basic IT skills and cultural background to win the initial inertia for starting to use it in a meaningful way'.

## **2.2 The Matthew effect, older people, and technology**

There is conflicting evidence on if and how the digital divide will close in the future. Morris, et al. (2007) felt there was a 'strong likelihood' that the 'grey' digital divide will naturally be 'bridged', suggesting that as subsequent years of older people get 'used' to using computers, the divide will disappear. van Dijk (2005, p. 45) argues that as technology changes further, perhaps deeper, divides will emerge. He believes that those with 'resources at their disposal benefit first and most' (van Dijk, 2005, p. 125) and as a result, the 'socially strong' will always benefit more than the 'social weak' (van Dijk, 2005, p. 172). The imminent sociologist Robert Merton's, 'Matthew Effect', which refers to the Gospel of Matthew's: 'For to all those who have, more will be given' (The Bible, 1989) can also apply to digital resources. With regards to the digital divide, it means that people with assets and the wherewithal will continually have a 'head start' and then subsequently 'benefit more from a new resource' (van Dijk, 2005, p. 125). Those that do not, will be 'truly disadvantaged' and unsurprisingly, this has a disproportionate impact on older people (van Dijk, 2005, p. 158).

Others question whether the gap will ever close, with some suggesting that those that are 'behind' will forever 'find themselves unable to take advantage of ICT opportunities' (Gurstein, 2003). Kinney (2010) argues that while the divide may

close in one area, a new 'gulf' will emerge, citing access to dial-up, then broadband as a pattern. A further issue is emerging even for older people that frequently use the Internet. Professor William Dutton cites the 'new divides' between 'passive consumers of technology' and others that 'create their own content' (Wakefield, 2005). Given the popularity of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other social media devices not even on the radar of new learners, it is understandable that further divides will continue to emerge (Stelzner, 2011).

### **2.3 The problem of access**

Much research highlights the fact that physical access to computers is 'only a first and relatively low level step in the information literacy process' (Bertot, 2003). Some critics feel that too much focus on material access 'overlooks the question of skills and the societal resources that provide them' (Selwyn 2004; Warshauer 2003; van Dijk & Hacker 2003; van Dijk 2006, Hargattai 2002, as cited in Epstein, Nisbet & Gillespie, 2011). Significantly, research also points out that access does not equate to 'effective use', Cooper (2007) suggesting that 'merely having access to a computer no more makes one an expert in its use than having access to a kitchen makes one a chef' (as cited in James, 2008). Grant (2007) argues that to be fully engaged people need reasons for ICTs to be relevant and therefore 'meaningful' in their own lives. As a result, this lack of 'meaningful' access (Grant, 2007) may result in older people not being viable members of the new, digital economies or society.

Even with increased physical access to ICTs it does not necessarily ensure that digital needs are being met and as a result, the digital divide then becomes less about physical access and more a 'serious issue of social inequality' (Grant, 2007) when divisions continue to emerge and deepen. As the 'usage sophistication' of ICTs increases, so does the 'percentage of wealthy, educated people' (Ferro, et al., 2011). Though these same authors stressed this may be a result of more education leading to higher salaries or perhaps the converse, finance is too often a barrier to further ICT confidence and learning (van Dijk, 2006, p.225). Even amongst young people, with their 'near universal use of the internet' there are still one million children without home computer or internet access and they are from a

disproportionately disadvantaged background (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008, p. 39, as cited in Sinclair and Bramley, p. 3, 2011).

Other research suggests that increasing physical access should also be coupled with more IT training (Millward, 2003). Morris, Goodman & Brading (2007) found that courses, especially those that could accommodate learners with low skills or anxiety were imperative, especially reaching older people who were 'missing out on the benefits computers and the Internet can provide'. There is evidence to suggest that 'basic IT literacy' is crucial for future usage and 'increases the likelihood of greater internet access and greater extent of internet use' (Ferro, et al., 2011). This basic knowledge acts as a gateway to future learning 'by doing' which is where Ferro, et al. (2011) found the majority of the respondents in their study gained ICT knowledge. This contrasts with the mere 20% of 'formalized training' taking place in standard educational settings (Eurostat 2006, as cited in Ferro, et al., 2011).

Formal and informal ICT learning is also impacted by high-speed or even any available internet access. Ferro, et al., (2011) found there were more 'advanced users' of ICT in urban regions as many rural areas did not yet have access to broadband networks. There is a real issue with rural Internet black spots and slow broadband speeds including Norfolk (Leggett, 2011). The current government may want to force people to go online by instituting online-only access to forms but Adrian Wooster, an expert in rural broadband access, claims that '140,000...have no access to the Internet' and 'two million have speeds so slow' government forms could not be downloaded (Asthana and McVeigh, 2010). Since this research project took place, Norfolk County Council, whose libraries took part in this study, received a fifteen million pound matching grant from the Government's Broadband Delivery UK, to overcome this access barrier. Set for implementation from September 2012, the project seeks to bridge the urban/rural divide by increasing the prevalence of broadband across parts of rural Norfolk (Norfolk County Council, 2011). In one of the author's focus groups in particular, two members of the focus group were unable to have broadband internet access in their home and were forced to use the library, as they found dial-up access incredibly slow and as a result, extremely expensive. This increased availability is bound to make a positive impact on learning and skills.



## **2.4 Impact on older populace**

The digital divide has a significant impact on older people. The United Kingdom is an ageing population, with 16 percent of the population over the age of 65 (Office for National Statistics, 2010), with six million people over sixty-five that have not used the Internet (Asthana and McVeigh, 2010). Of those, only some 41% of have a PC or laptop, 37% with internet access. Going up a decade in age, this figure drops to only 28%, with only 15% having broadband access (Choudrie, Grey & Tsitsianis, 2010). This is a serious concern, because some authors claim (Foley, Alfonso, Brown & Fisher, 2003, p. 77) that a 'lack of participation or isolation or lack of opportunity can be exacerbated for many socially excluded groups through lack of access to ICT'.

This also impacts on the recent announcements that the current government hopes to move all services to an online only format as soon as possible (Asthana and McVeigh, 2010). Moving services online, coupled with many elderly people not online at all, will most certainly mean the likelihood for digital isolation and social exclusion remains high (Olphert, Damodaran, & May, 2005). The elderly often feel the effects of the digital divide more profoundly than other groups, as a trainer in Morris, Goodman, & Brading's (2007) study astutely commented, 'the sixty plus generation completely missed out in learning about computers and IT' in either a work or school setting or context.

There are also physical limitations for older people. Becker (2005) addresses the 'physiological changes' that can 'impact the ability to see web objects and read online content' and a 'decrease in motor coordination' which will impact on using computer mice (Ellis and Kurnianam, 2000, as cited in Becker, 2005) as a significant barrier to learning. Moreover, learning for the elderly can simply take longer. Hargittai (2002, 2003 as cited in van Dijk, 2005) found that older people took three times as much time than the average user to find information online.

Beyond the issue of access, there are still underlying issues for many older people with regards to IT costs, their information needs, and general concerns, for example, with Internet security (Olphert, et al., 2005). Moreover, being able to use a computer does not solve the deep-seeded social problems within the digital divide

(van Dijk, 2005, p. 75) and does not necessarily translate into effective use, especially amongst the most vulnerable groups in society (Sinclair and Bramley, p. 2, 2011).

## **2.5 Computer courses for older adult learners**

There is significant evidence that the Internet can help the elderly. Access in all its facets is not just a target, as using online services can significantly improve the health and well-being of older people, especially those 'at risk of exclusion by reason of poverty, disability or poor health, or social inclusion' (Olphert, et al., 2005). With regards to non-users, Vuori and Holmlund-Rytönen (2005, as cited in Olphert, et al., 2005) found that twenty-five percent of older people felt 'positive' about the internet and 'thought they would become users in the near future'. Morris, et al. (2007) also found that the 'majority of users...believed that the Internet had made a positive impact on their life and that they would miss it if they could no longer use it'.

Given that retirement can occupy up to a third of an adult life (McNair, 2009a, as cited in Schuller & Watson, 2009, p. 50) it is contradictory that current adult learning provision decreases rather than increases for older people and 'training at work diminishes very sharply for those over 55' (Schuller and Watson, 2009, p. 55). Some research suggests that the target ages of current adult education policies are outdated and should be increased to incorporate people's learning into their adult life (Schuller and Watson, 2009, p. 111). The lack of adult education provision to meet increased demand is also highlighted by van Dijk (2005, p. 171) who calls it 'the most serious problem in regard to educational participation and ICT access is adult education'. This predicament sustains the 'relatively low participation rates in adult and lifelong learning' in the United Kingdom (Tuckett and Aldridge, 2009, as cited in Eynon & Helsper, 2010). The results of this could be startling, as van Dijk suggests that by not creating more 'educational opportunities of the new digital media for this age group in particular' will lead to exclusion with regards to mental, social and cultural opportunities (2005, p. 171).

## **2.6 Government policies thus far**

There has been significant investment in various IT policies and programmes, such as UK Online Centres, Learn Direct or Wired-up communities (Choudrie, Grey & Tsitsianis, 2010). Government policies and initiatives often give a blanket approach to closing the digital divide but are not as specific with regards to what exactly access means. In the main, many policies have focused on physical access, such as providing internet access through all public library terminals via the People's Network (Hardie-Boys, 2004). Started in 2000, the People's Network spent nearly £100 million pounds and provided over 30,000 computers in 4,000 libraries, as well as spending £20 million pounds on training library staff. A study done on its completion found that 16% of the public had used a public library to access the internet (MORI, 2004, as cited in Hardie-Boys, 2004). The success of increased centralised spending by government is supported by the Oxford Internet Institute's claim that 'only 4% of the British population lacks ready access to a place there they can use the Internet' (Morris, Goodman & Brading, 2007).

Even with increased physical access to IT, many adults still do not 'use those technologies to engage in meaningful social practices' (Norris, 2001, as cited in Olphert, Damodaran, & May, 2005). Despite increased awareness and access, Morris, et al. (2007) also found that a significant number of participants within their study said 'access' [was] a key factor in [their] lack of interest in computers and the Internet. Moreover, Fox (2001, as cited in Olphert, et al., 2005) found '56% of those over 65 years of age [said] they would never go online'.

Gurstein (2003) criticizes policies that allow significant funds to be spent on 'ICT infrastructure and access points' but not enough extended to local groups for 'developing, managing and maintaining ICT capabilities'.

## **2.7 The role of public libraries**

The prevalence, opening hours and free access of ICTs in most of the United Kingdom's public libraries, demonstrates the usefulness and uniqueness of public libraries in bridging the digital divide (Oliver, 2007). Some older people would have

never had computers at school or at work so in order to engage, must depend on 'private computer classes....to catch up' (van Dijk, 2005, p. 171). van Dijk (2005, p. 213) also argues that there is a significant gap in IT provision within adult education, with much talk about 'lifelong learning' but 'investment in it scarce', so public libraries may provide a niche role as a public, generally free service. van Dijk (2005, p. 211) goes as far as to say that 'the importance of these public access places in closing the digital divide cannot be overrated'.

As a public service, libraries can 'provide access for the disadvantaged', by 'providing training and outreach' (James, 2008). Newman (2004, as cited in Oliver, 2007) suggests that public libraries have 'three essential ingredients needed to ensure benefits for all in the digital era: 'Infrastructure, content, and access'. Unlike some other services, James (2008) feels that 'libraries have been remarkably quick to identify community needs and respond with appropriate technologies' despite often having 'severe resource constraints'. Oliver (2007) found that public libraries can play a significant role in 'developing and delivering information and ICT literacy training' or at the very least, act as a 'precursor to acquiring internet access at home' (Boase et al., 2002, as cited in Oliver, 2007).

Kaplan (2005) argues that the public sector should focus on '[raising] awareness and training people to use e-services' while James (2008) believes that if libraries look beyond 'public access' they will be 'even more effective at fostering social equality. To do it correctly, libraries need to use 'educators' rather than 'computer experts' to ensure IT projects succeed (Warschauer, 2003, p. 212). Kinney (2010) believes that IT training by library staff is a 'natural extension of libraries information literacy role' and 'very important' and 'how libraries stand out from other providers of Internet access'.

There are problems with the model of depending on public libraries for bridging the digital divide, however. The recent government cuts have meant thousands of United Kingdom libraries face opening hour's reduction or closure (Page, 2011). For library services, there is also a constant need to update computer hardware and software, which can limit the access of public computer users (Pateman, 2007/2008). There is a danger that public libraries might feed into the digital divide by either not

updating hardware or software as necessary or by charging individuals for public use, thereby undermining the ethos of the People's Network (Pateman, 2007/2008).

## **2.8 Gaps in current research**

Much research focuses on the digital divide on the elderly but few on the 'elderly's uses and attitudes towards the Internet' (Eastman and Fyer, 2004). It is also suggested that more attention needs to be paid towards 'the specific issues that most impact the perception of ease of use and safety' how these needs can be carried out (Eastman and Fyer, 2004). Olphert et al. (2005) feel that in order to expand 'digital inclusion' it is imperative to 'understand the factors which cause or contribute to digital exclusion.' Olphert et al. (2005) also point out the lack of qualitative evidence and more specifically, studies do not probe further to discover the issues of older people's anxiety with computers, as well as most research coming from outside of the United Kingdom. van Dijk (2006, p.232) complains about the dependence on quantitative data to make broad assessments and the lack of qualitative data. He suggests following the line of Laura Stanley's research into a 'small individual and group settings where interpersonal relations and particular cultures dominate' (van Dijk, 2006, p. 232). Eynon and Helsper (2010, p. 15) also suggest the need for quantitative research to be 'complemented by more qualitative work', which would allow for 'a more holistic view' which in turn would 'better support and inform lifelong learning initiatives that make use of the internet'.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

One of the difficulties of the digital divide is defining it, as each explanation might lead to a wide range of policies and provisions. Despite numerous definitions and initiatives to combat the digital divides a significant proportion of the United Kingdom are considered 'digitally excluded'. While some people believe that the digital divide can be closed, others feel that new, emerging technologies and skills required to operate them insures that the digital divide will continue.

Many recent digital inclusion projects focussed on providing physical access to computers and the internet but some research argues that without basic IT literacy

and/or skills providing physical access it not enough. This is compounded by both a lack of adult IT in addition to inadequate broadband networks in some areas. The digital divide has a disproportionate impact on older people because they have 'missed out' on training opportunities at work, school or at home as well as physical limitations such as issues with dexterity or eyesight.

It is also argued that public libraries can play a unique role in providing both IT courses and internet access, given their (mostly) free provision, proximity to their communities, trained staff and updated computer facilities. This provision is becoming increasingly difficult in light of current national and local government cuts.

Finally, most research is based on quantitative data and some author argued that more qualitative data should be gathered to better inform the digital divide debate as well as policy provisions and programmes. This current research, then, has informed the basis for determining which methodological approaches to take with regards to this research project.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

It was important during this study to ascertain a small amount of background information about the participants but also get a more in-depth understanding of how the Surf's Up course they attended had impacted on their computer skills. Background reading for the literature review revealed that although there was significant quantitative data regarding the digital divide, there was far less with regards to any quality qualitative data (van Dijk, 2006, p. 232). The author was going to be working with a new group of people and some basic background information about IT habits were required to better understand the group the author would be working with. For this reason, a mixed approach of both quantitative and qualitative methods, via a questionnaire and focus groups were employed. As participants names and opinions were gathered, they were asked to provide both consent to take part and permission to use their thoughts in this thesis.

Once the data was gathered, it was analysed by seeking out various themes to see if there were any viewpoints or opinions that were similar across the four focus groups. When these themes were found, the author analysed them to reveal if any future needs had been discovered or potential solutions to help users similar to those on the course. These themes were also compared with the original data from the questionnaires, when the participants first began their course.

All of these data were gathered while working within a short timeframe, attempting to manage the scheduling of courses, the author's own schedule and one of the most treacherous winters on record.

### **3.2 Methods selected**

As Bryman (2004) suggested, gathering both quantitative and qualitative will allow 'access to perspectives of the people they are studying' along with data on 'specific issues in which they are interested' (p. 459). Cresswell (2009, p. 213) also states

the positives of doing a mixed-method approach, saying it often results in 'well-validated and substantial findings'.

With regards to the quantitative approach, it was felt that a simple questionnaire would offer a brief introduction to the group that would be questioned further in the focus group (personal communication, 21 October 2010, A. Simon). Concurrently, the questionnaire would introduce the participants to the author, the research project and the purpose of trying to obtain the information, before the author facilitated the focus groups. Any results would also help shape a view of the participants and their opinions gathered during the more in-depth focus group.

Using focus groups to discover more in-depth information about participants was chosen for a number of reasons. van Dijk (2006, p.232) complained that a dependence on quantitative data resulted in broad assessments. Similarly, Olphert et al. (2005) sought out more data on anxiety amongst older IT users, which was not garnered within standard quantitative data. In this way, focus groups would 'yield data on the uncertainties, ambiguities' (Bloor, et al., 2001, p. 4). Although there was data to be discovered using observational or participatory methods, as participants often voice their frustrations or successes while participating in the course, it was felt that responses would be more stimulating in a focus group setting (Mason, 2007, p. 64). The focus groups would also be a way for the participants to either confirm or contrast commonly held views on the elderly with regards to ICT (Bloor, et al., 2001, p. 5).

It was hoped that these focus groups would lend to a 'nonthreatening environment' (Krueger, 1994, p. 6) where participants would reveal their 'human tendencies' (Krueger, 1994, p. 10). In addition, the focus group format would lend itself to an increased level of 'self-disclosure' (Krueger, 1994, p. 11) whereby other group members might influence each other (Krueger, 1994, p. 6). This might also then create a 'group dynamic' (Barbour, 2007, p. 77) that would lead to an increased level of 'interaction between participants' (Barbour, 2007, p. 153). Moreover, the Surf's Up course acted as a 'pre-existing social group' that might bring about 'interaction comments about shared experiences and events' (Bloor et al, 2001, p. 22). It was felt that these positives outweighed the potential negative of participants potentially



being more likely to answer questions if directly asked if on their own, opting out when they were in a group setting (Bryman, 2004, p. 135).

### **3.3 Creating questionnaire and focus group questions**

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) asked basic questions concerning the participants' age, and current experience with various forms of IT. For example, 'Would you like to get internet access at home' and 'Have you used library computers before?' With these questions, a Likert scale, yes/no approach was used (Neuman, 2006, p. 207) as the first part of the questionnaire sought a quick response to current needs rather than opinions on such. The subsequent questions asked the participants what they would like to achieve and general attitude towards computers and the Internet. Similar to questions asked in the focus group, the author often employed 'sentence completion' on the questionnaire, which allows 'participants to complete one or more sentences' in order to 'elicit information on motivation and feelings' (Krueger, 1994, p. 61). For example, 'What would you like to accomplish on this course?' and 'Things that make me nervous about going online are'. These questions attempted to 'avoid ambiguity, confusion and vagueness' (Neuman, 2006, p. 278) so participants could answer without the assistance of the facilitator. The questionnaire was piloted with another Surf's Up group, before using it at the formal research stage in order to 'avoid respondent errors' (Neuman, 2006, p. 276).

For the focus group research, within the opening statement (see Appendix B), care was taken with regards to clearly explaining that different opinions were sought, saying 'there are no right or wrong answers, but rather different points of view' (Krueger, 1994, p. 13). At the same time, it was also reiterated that this group was chosen because although they may have different opinions they have things in common, stating, 'you were selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to us' (Krueger, 1994, p. 14).

With regards to the focus group questions themselves (see Appendix C) the author sought ones that were 'clear, brief and reasonable' (Krueger, 1998, p. 14) but also that achieved a 'flow' through the different question stages (Krueger, 1998, p. 21).

The session started with a round-robin opening question, which was meant to be 'answered rather quickly and to identify characteristics that the participants [had] in common' (Krueger, 1994, p. 54). This was followed by three introductory questions which guided the participants towards their own experiences as well thinking about the theme of the research project (Krueger, 1994, p. 54), for example, 'What sort of experience with computers did you have before this course?' They aimed to concentrate on why people had decided to do a course on computers and previous barriers to going online.

Next, there were four transition questions, so as to focus on things that '[drove] the study' and to link together both the introductory and key questions (Krueger, 1994, p. 54), for example, "What things did you want to try on Surf's Up course?' These questions tried to ascertain what sort of internet experience participants had before the course and how they felt about the Internet in general.

These were then followed by four key questions, which focused on the things that still concerned the participants about going online, to see where their comfort level with the Internet was after nearly twelve hours of tuition. This included, 'What is the biggest barrier to you feeling more confident online?' The questions also sought to discover what things they felt they had achieved and how they had changed because of the course. Finally, there were two ending questions, which would allow for some reflection on the discussion as well as their learning journey (Krueger, 1994, p. 55). For example, 'If you were trying to encourage someone who was reluctant to go online, what would you say?' As with the questionnaire, they used sentence completion with many of the questions, especially those in the ending questions, so as to really try and understand specific 'motivations and feelings' (Krueger, 1994, p. 61) that would not necessarily be acquired otherwise.

### **3.4 Organisation of focus groups**

This research was looking at participants within NLIS's Surf's Up project, and the courses lent themselves to the focus group format. As the Surf's Up courses were weekly sessions, with a high participation rate, no additional focus group date

would need to be arranged and organised. Participants would hopefully attend their final sessions and if willing, also take part in the focus group.

The study wanted to be able to contact people at both the beginning and end of the six-week course, and as a result the author was limited by a number of factors, some unavoidable. It was decided to look at different types and sizes of library communities but also not to concentrate on libraries where the author worked. In addition, the focus groups were limited by courses that were occurring within a specific timeframe, where they were beginning within the timeframe of the research project and also that the author was able to attend the final session.

For these reasons, Stalham Library (STA), in Stalham, Norfolk, a small village, Aylsham Library (AYL), in Aylsham, Norfolk, a smaller market town, North Walsham Library (NWA), in North Walsham, Norfolk, a larger market town, and the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library (NML), Norwich, Norfolk, the largest in NLIS and the busiest library in the country, (Reading Agency, 2010) were chosen. As these courses were made up of a small number of people, the focus groups were always going to be limited in size, or as Krueger calls them, 'mini focus groups' (1994, p. 79). He also suggested (1994, p. ix) that 'smaller groups...offer more opportunity for individuals to talk but are considerably more practical to set up and manage' and that the participants might potentially feel 'more comfortable' in a smaller group setting. The small groups were also appropriate for the mostly over-65 age group that attend Surf's Up sessions, as Quine and Cameron (1995) encouraged smaller focus groups so as to allow everyone to 'see and hear each other adequately' (as cited in Bloor et al., 2001, p. 27). However, small focus groups can also be a disadvantage, in that they may 'result in limited discussion' or that a limited number of participants results in a question-and-answer type situation with the author and the participants rather than a discussion (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 27).

After discussions with the Community Librarian running the Surf's Up sessions, it was agreed to conduct the focus group during the tea/coffee break, so as to allow sufficient time for the participants to continue their learning but also because it was felt that this would be a good 'break' from studying to discuss. Using advice from Barbour (2007, p. 75) the author provided a sample of superior biscuits compared to

the normal fare, so as to '[show] gratitude to participants and [encourage] a relaxed atmosphere'.

Before the actual focus groups were run, a pilot test of the questionnaire and focus group was done, approximately one month before the official sessions were to begin. This was done for feedback on particular questions as well as ascertaining what areas needed to be improved with regards to helping participants express themselves better (Krueger, 1994, p. 68, Neuman, 2006, p. 276).

### **3.5 Running of focus groups**

At the beginning of the six-week Surf's Up course, participants were read an introduction to the questionnaire and the author's project (see Appendix D) by the Community Librarian running the course. At the same time, they were given information about the questionnaire and project itself (see Appendix E), and a consent form to read and sign (see Appendix F). These questionnaires were then collected and posted to the author. After attending the course for five weeks, the author attended the sixth and final session to hold the focus group. Participants were told in advance that the author would be attending.

As participants would take part in half of their Surf's Up session before the focus group, the author arrived at the library to discuss logistics with the Community Librarian running the session before it began. This involved specific timings, where they would be during the focus group as well as any information about participants that might be useful beforehand (someone who was hearing impaired, etc.) The Surf's Up session began with the Community Librarian giving an outline of the day's course, mentioning that during the tea break another Community Librarian would be holding a focus group and that they had the choice to not participate if they wanted.

When the tea break commenced, the author allowed the participants to be settled with their cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit, so as to not create more noise during the session. The author used a set statement to introduce the group to the process which was followed by a set of questions. After turning on the recording device, the author read the set statement, outlining what was going to happen, how the session would be recorded on a digital device and offered advice with regards to speaking

clearly and one at a time. It was then mentioned that notes would be taken, so as to be completely clear with the participants as to what the author was doing.

During each focus group, the author read through the questions, asking clarifying questions if the answer was unclear and occasionally rephrasing if the response was not as anticipated (Barbour, 2007, p. 114). Care was also taken by the author to avoid adding too many of her own personal comments or questions in order to keep 'the discussion on track' (Barbour, 2007, p. 106). The author was also careful to avoid 'body language that might communicate approval or disapproval' (Krueger, 1994, p. 13).

When the questions were all asked as appropriate to the group, the recording device was turned off and the participants were thanked for their time as well as the Community Librarian and library assistant that were also in attendance.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

After the first Surf's Up sessions, the questionnaires were collected together. The information from the questionnaire was placed in a spreadsheet (see Appendix G) with separate headings for each particular library. Once completed, this was printed out so as to better view similarities amongst the participants, mostly with regards to the usage of IT. Many questions were simply not answered and this data was also noted.

In order to have sufficient qualitative data, all of the recordings were transcribed as accurately as possible, which was difficult given the extraneous noise in some recordings. This follows Bloor et al.'s (2001, p. 60) advice 'to transcribe all recorded speech'...including 'very brief extracts of speech, such as agreement with the main speaker, in the form of 'mm' or 'yeah'. It was hoped then, that the transcript would be 'as near as possible to the group as it happened, so that anyone reading the transcript [could] really 'see' how the group went' (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 61).

The methods of analysis of the data gathered from the focus groups were as Neuman called, 'less standardised, and less explicitly outlined' (2006, p. 467). For this reason, the author instead sought to find 'patterns in data recurrent behaviours,

objects, phases or ideas' (Neuman, 2006, p. 467). In this way, the data could be looked at in an 'interpretive approach' (Neuman, 2006, p. 468) and then use 'analogies' to 'facilitate logical comparisons' (Neuman, 2006 p. 460). This study also employed 'concurrent triangulation' whereby quantitative and qualitative data is collected concurrently, then compared for convergences and/or differences (Creswell, 2009, p. 213). Once patterns were identified, these were coupled with the 'setting in which it occurred' to provide a 'more general interpretation' (Neuman, 2006, p. 467). Finding these patterns and making these interpretations then allowed for the author to make a more broad assessment of the Surf's Up groups in general. As a result, this 'interpretive approach' would give a more 'sensitive' assessment with regards 'to the context and cultural meanings of members' (Neuman, 2006, p. 468) rather than based on coding alone.

### **3.7 Problems and lessons learned**

Some problems with basing research on recordings collected were anticipated, like Bryman's (2004, p. 360) warning that focus group 'recordings are more time-consuming to transcribe'. This was not so much a problem as a very long task to complete. Although purchasing voice-recognition software was considered, it was deemed too expensive and was informed by a colleague that it often missed vital regional words or dialects, something to consider in parts of rural Norfolk where the research occurred.

In some focus groups, there was a slight problem of one person speaking too much but in the main, people seemed to respect each other and give one another a chance to speak. At times, it sometimes followed a interview, person-to-person type approach with the questioning rather than being more free flowing but participants seemed to relax as the session went on, not waiting for their 'turn' to respond.

In two of the groups there were issues with attendance, both of which had nothing to do the focus group occurring on that particular day. Although Bryman (2004, p. 351) suggests 'consciously over-recruiting', as the Surf's Up groups were finite in size and specific in their timeframe and participants, this was not possible. In both cases, the participants' non-attendance was a surprise to the Community Librarian running the

course, and it was decided to carry on, even though the focus groups only had three people in them.

One other significant problem at two of the libraries was extraneous noise. At all but one, the libraries were closed during the session, so this was not as much of a problem. However, one of the closed libraries had a very loud boiler fan and the other library is never closed during normal business hours, and the only other meeting place was some distance from where the course was taking place. The author had reservations about a focus group in this location and her fears were realised when about ten to fifteen percent of the recorded data was unintelligible because of the noise. The only way to have improved this was to insist on moving elsewhere and/or booking the suitable training room some months in advance.

From a methods standpoint, data obtained from using focus groups can also be depended on too much and perhaps result in sweeping judgements. Bloor et al., (2001, p. 94) warned of the 'danger of viewing focus group findings as somehow the direct, untrammelled and transparent reporting of our inner nature'. It was also warned that any results should be viewed as those impacted by 'uncertainty, variation and frailty' and used for arguments and research with due caution (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 94).

Finally, the author found it difficult to refrain from participating or heeding the 'minimal intervention' that Bryman (2004, p. 353) suggests. At times the author found herself agreeing or providing her own anecdotal evidence. After her pilot focus group she improved on this but after four more sessions, it was felt that after a large-scale project more improvements would have been made.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

For the purpose of this study, it was decided to use a mixed-methods approach, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. This was done via a questionnaire, where participants were introduced to the project but also able to give some background to their prior IT and Internet experience. In addition, focus groups were also used to allow participants to fully express their views on various questions

regarding their experience with using the Internet and learning on the Surf's Up course as well as using the group dynamic to elicit a fuller response.

The questionnaire was developed to obtain a brief overview of the participant's experience thus far and the focus group used questions that would create a flow-like process, whereby a range of opinions and feelings would be obtained. Once all of the data was collected, the author analysed the questionnaires via a spreadsheet, noting similarities in age and IT experience. With the focus groups, all of the recorded data was transcribed and general themes and common opinions were ascertained before a clearer picture emerged from the four groups.

Although limited by course start dates, extreme winter conditions and some participants failing to attend their final session, the author felt like many of the problems that occurred did not make too much of a negative impact on the collected data. In hindsight, more consideration could have been given to reduce outside noise but in some cases, this would have proved very difficult and potentially impossible.



## Chapter 4: Results

### 4.1 Questionnaire results

A total of nineteen participants completed the questionnaire across the four participating libraries. Four focus groups were held in a variety of libraries with NLIS, with seventeen Surf's Up attendees participating. The questionnaire was conceived as a means of capturing a broad overview of IT knowledge, experience and skills of participants on the Surf's Up course. In that sense, the data achieved was not anticipated to influence most of the results and discussion itself but to confirm the target groups and IT experience associated with many of the participants on the Surf's Up courses.

Data from the questionnaire was collated into a spreadsheet and divided by the each individual library. As the research cohorts across the four libraries were individually and collectively relatively small in number, it was possible to manually analyse the results rather than use a standardised quantitative software package such as SPSS. The closed response questions, such as 'Do you own a mobile phone?' and the open response questions, such as, 'What would you like to accomplish on this course?' answers were observed by the author and analysed using simple maths or by examining general feelings regarding their previous IT and computer experience. As was previously described in the methodology section, the questionnaire was distributed by another Community Librarian colleague. Participants were read a short paragraph describing the questionnaire and then asked to complete. All but two of the questionnaires were done at the course, two were not at the initial session when they were distributed and completed their forms at home. Some questions were not answered by participants, and no apparent reason for not answering, so for some questions, there were limited responses.

The Surf's Up course is aimed at people over the age of sixty-five, although this is not a strict or enforced requirement of being on the course. The average age was sixty-six and the median age was sixty-nine. The youngest participant was fifty-eight, the oldest, eighty-four. Nine out of nineteen of the participants owned their own computers and of these six people also had internet access at home. Two that owned a computer but did not have internet access were a married couple and later complained in their focus group about the difficulties of getting broadband internet in

rural Norfolk. Mobile phone ownership was overwhelmingly in the affirmative, with sixteen owning them, though the questionnaire did not specify whether these were phones with mobile broadband access, or standard mobile phones-phone calls and texts only. Only five of the participants had previously used library computers.

The majority of the participants (eleven out of nineteen) had not previously used computers. Of those that had experience, it was limited to word processing or being taught by others.

*(NWA) L: A few sessions with a computer literate friend.*

When asked, 'what would you like to accomplish' the responses mainly focussed on basic skills.

*(NWA) D: To be able to use a computer to some extent.*

*(STA) D: To know what to do, search, email.*

*(NML) H: To be confident.*

With regards to things online that they would like to 'do' many spoke about finding 'information'.

*(NWA) H: Find information about anything I would want.*

Some simply wanting to know what is 'out there'.

*(NML) M: Find out what is available and how to access it.*

When asked what would make them 'feel more comfortable online,' participants spoke of the desire to 'know more'.

*(AYL) L: [If] I was shown how to do it and could practice online with help 'at hand'.*

*(NML) W: [If] I knew more and had more practical use of computers.*

Participants often spoke of worrying about making mistakes when asked what made them 'nervous about going online'.

*(NWA) H: Making mistakes and not knowing what to do.*

*(STA) D: Pressing the wrong buttons, in case I give bank details, etc.*

Participants were also asked: 'I would feel comfortable doing the following online' and asked to tick the corresponding boxes. They were not asked, however, if this

task would be done by them or if a friend, family member or staff member would be helping them.

**Table 1: Responses to question, 'I would feel comfortable doing the following online'**

11%	Internet banking
63%	Email
89%	Searching
42%	Buying something
22%	Paying bills
58%	Doing a course

## **4.2 Focus group results**

After transcribing all of the focus group interviews the author sought to identify common themes or discussion points running through each transcript. Having determined the main themes for each of the four focus groups (see Appendix H), the author collated each of the focus groups onto a document with columns for each group containing approximately ten main themes each, so as to observe and compare them as a composite document (see Appendix I). When this was completed, the author colour-coded the document to reveal the similar themes across different focus groups (see Appendix J). The author completed this process by taking similar themes from different focus groups, for example, 'feeling left behind' and 'worried about being left behind' and then correlated the corresponding direct participant quotations in a document, including library location, the person who spoke and the quote itself (see Appendix K). This allowed the author to have the quotes and themes from across the focus groups in a document whereby substantial qualitative evidence could be easily compared and more specific themes would emerge. As a result, across the four separate focus groups, similar themes regarding attitudes and experiences with IT and the internet began to emerge. All of the quotes included in the results portion of focus group findings and that are used as evidence to support the themes themselves are verbatim and were taken from the focus group transcripts.

### 4.3 Left behind and isolation

Many of the participants experienced the feeling that they were isolated not being online. This isolation was often attributed to a lack of prior computer experience in any form.

*(STA) L: I've never had to use computers, computers at my place of work. Never, you know. So I think, if you do a job, where, where you had to use a computer. Then, that's different but, I've never had to do that.*

*(AYL) L: I've not used a computer for work so it was an alien being.*

Participants also felt isolated by the way in which a lot of information is increasingly only available online.

*(AYL) L: It's getting to the stage where everything is, computer, website, addresses, everything. You can't even get a telephone number sometimes when you want to get something. So crunch time!*

*(NML) B: Everything for me was on the television and everything was www.com and I thought, the whole world is stopping at www. It's a new world.*

*(AYL) H: Everything that you pick up, nowadays it says, go online, do this online, you know, it, it just seems to be, the way forward.*

There was also the feeling across the groups that by not being online, participants were missing out. Only one of the focus group participants went into specifics with regards to what exactly they were 'missing out' on with the others just saying in the general sense of missing what other people might easily find out online.

*(AYL) S: And I'd like to be, you know, I'd like to have access to some of the stuff that is being done on the computer for, for, photography.*

*(NWA) H: There's so much that you can't do if you're not online.*

*(STA) L: Well, I felt that we needed to join the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And, things are becoming, so that, unless you are online, and got a computer you can't do so many things. And everybody seems to be using a computer now, so it just seemed a good idea to sort of get with everybody else.*

Others mentioned understanding their isolation in relation to others being online or literally being alone, and realising they needed to make a change.

*(NML) G: I think, I saw my daughter and my other children using it and I realised that it's a brilliant medium.*

*(NWA) Jt: When I was left on my own I began to realise that I might need it.*

*(AYL) S: My tutor...she has to print out the stuff. And giving me the stuff she is sending to everyone else [via email].*

Some also mentioned feeling left behind by virtue of their age. Others mentioned their physical health and mental acuity. This was perhaps most apparent in the observation that for 'young people' exposure to computers in general and the internet in general was an inescapable reality of everyday life, whether that be in terms of education, employment or personal recreation.

*(NWA) Jt: I mean, they all learnt in school the young ones, we didn't, we're like thick things, you know!*

*(NWA) D: Or your grandchildren and all that, and they know how to do it and they're talking in this language you don't know what it's on about, they're so quick, that you just, you don't stand a chance!*

*(STA) L: Of course, it's, it's so alien, you know. Whereas, the younger generation, they're just brought up with it. It's just natural, isn't it?*

*(STA): R: I forget a lot. I think it must be down to age. I'm sure it is.*

*(STA) W: I think when you're older it takes more time for things to sink in. I, I'm not very good at concentrating, never have been, you so, so, I, I find it easy to just to drift, off into a trance or something. It's, you know, I do find it difficult, to sort of concentrate.*

#### **4.4 Family motivations**

Along with the feeling of isolation, missing out or being left behind, many felt motivated to get online so they would be able to keep in contact with family and friends that lived elsewhere and a similar sentiment was expressed by as those who lived or travelled overseas.

*(AYL) L: I wanted to go to email people because I spend quite a lot of time abroad, so I wanted to be able to communicate with people in this country when I'm in France.*

*(AYL) H: Our niece has just gone to live in Sydney, Australia, so that's another motivation. To sort of contact her, email her, get pictures and things like that.*

*(AYL) S: Every time we phoned her it was the wrong time. She's either going to bed or getting up, you know. We've never got it right so far.*

Often this was the turning point for many of the participants. Instead of thinking or even longing about going online to keep in contact, many spoke of a steely resolve to get online, out of a sense of anticipated pleasure and the need to stay in contact.

*(NWA) H: I wasn't really interested to be honest with you. It's come to the point, where, I live, my daughter lives in Ireland and my son lives, you know, a three hour drive away, and thought, it's a case of having to, really. To keep in contact and so forth.*

*(NWA) J: Well, I never really wanted to have anything to do with computers at all. But I was, had my arm twisted. I have a son living in Canada, and he kept threatening that I should really go online, have a computer and go online, and he insisted...he gave me a second-hand computer, which we brought home and I really then we had no choice, I had to do something.*

*(NWA) Jt: Same with me, I've got no one anybody near me. So, I really need to be able to you know, keep in touch.*

*(STA) R: It's fantastic [Skype]. Just to sit there and sometimes the words are almost level and other times they're not but just to see 'em in front of you and mucking about. And you could almost touch them and they're a thousand miles away.*

#### **4.5 Difficulties in where to start and how to learn**

Despite having significant motivations to go online, either to find information, keep in touch with family and friends or simply to try it out, many of the participants spoke of the difficulty of not knowing where or how to begin their learning journey. Even with a significant proportion of the focus group members having internet access at home, many were overwhelmed by the enormity and scope of the internet.

*(AYL) L: Just lack of knowledge, I think. I just didn't have a clue...That was it, really, for me. Not having a clue what to do.*

*(AYL) H: Once again, I've had just used a computer, as I said, at home, we have had one for about a couple of years but it was mainly to use it to write letters and things like that, you know. But I just had no idea really or confidence to use the internet, surf the net, learn all the correct...terminology.*

*(NWA) J: Just get on with it but not really understanding what you're doing.*

*(NWA) Jn: Yes, I did have it [the internet] before I came here and I did get online but actually then I had trouble with my service provider and was out of service for three weeks or a month. And that didn't boost my confidence.*

This anxiety of not knowing where to start was also coupled with the difficulty of learning from friends and family members that had previous experience with the internet and IT in general. Although this could be a significant help with regards to

obtaining information and services online it could hinder the participants' own learning experience.

*(NWA) J: Because my husband is so difficult. He works from home on the computer and it's like ughhhhh!!!... So really, I've been put more off then put on. Um, so I need to do it by myself and not ask any questions.*

*(NWA) H: I never did go online but my son, you know, when my son's been on it. Then you ask him something and he says, 'I already told you once!'*

*(STA) W: Well I had but only what my daughter told me. And it's so quick that you can't take it in and she hasn't got the temperament to...*

This was also coupled with the issue of family members and friends often doing the necessary things for the focus group members, rather than them actually independently achieving the tasks on their own or with assistance.

*(NML) C: I saw something about getting online on the BBC and I never thought that I would need it, because I had a son and a daughter that could get online.*

*(NML) J: My son-in-law [helped me get online]*

*(NWA) J: Having things done for me, you know. Everyone was doing things for me. And saying, 'it'll be quicker if I do it' says the other person, 'I'm much quicker, don't worry, I'll do it.'*

*(STA) R: I watch my daughters on the, on the computer and I watch the wife but I never touch anything but I don't know what to do and I don't know what I'm talking about. I'd ask my wife. And she'd do it. Or ask one of you.*

#### **4.6 Basic skills as a gateway**

After six weeks on the course, many of the participants spoke of the importance of gaining basic skills as a means to go on to further learning. They gave specific weight to how basic skills could boost confidence and that gaining these tools allowed them to both move forward but to also to believe in other internet and IT skills they could achieve. They also mentioned the importance of having staff around when 'things go wrong' or when they felt 'stuck' in their learning process.

*(AYL) H: If you don't, you know, get enough skills. I think, you know, once you have the basic skills, it gives you the confidence to carry on. I think certainly the course has, you know, made me feel that I really need to go on another course now, to continue...I've, you know, it's been a fantastic start, you know, given us a lot of motivation.*

*(NML) B: Confidence to use it, to a degree. Where we want to go to.*

*(NWA) W: And I thought I really must learn to get on, how to get on to the internet and I'd had a very brief smattering of it, nothing like this to really get in to. I'm feeling quite confident.*

For some, the breakthrough was in simply understanding how the internet 'worked' or at the very least, the processes involved in getting online and how to surf the net or communicate with friends and loved ones.

*(NML) G: I think I've achieved the objective to get on the internet. It's a big, big step. Now it's really learning, actually, what website, how to get into these websites.*

*(STA) L: It's taking the fright out of it for a start. And learning how to sort of use it, and not be so afraid of it and I just find, you know, it's, given me an idea on how to find all sorts of information. I feel we're only just scratched the surface. And still feel very much a novice, but that will obviously come with practice, now. Now that we've learned a lot of the fundamental basics. It will come with practice.*

*(NML) D: That's what I found out here, actually. That it was fine to touch it.... It's good to know that if you get into trouble you can call someone straightaway. And they just go like that and you're back on! Where when you're on your own you're afraid of breaking it all the time.*

*(NML) R: I can understand what the wife is doing now!*

Others commented that they understood that any further progress in their learning would need to be coupled with actively practicing their new skills.

*(NML) G: And you go down or whatever. But yeah, I think for me, it's been good just to go on the internet. And I think now, it's up to me to come in here and um, how often or whatever and practice, really.*

*(NWA) J: I don't think any of us are, really [ready to be on their own]. But it's a matter of practice and you, you do learn by your own mistakes I do think, we're, probably, probably all at that stage where maybe, yeah?*



## 4.7 Security and personal details online

Even with this new-found confidence to learn more, participants still felt nervous about going online, people mentioning financial security as one issue but also the perceived dangers of simply divulging personal details online.

*(AYL) L: At the moment, if there was another option, I'd take the other option. I don't feel sufficiently confident to be able to do it. But if you had no other choice? You'd have to do it.*

*(STA) L: I wouldn't have the confidence, not yet anyway, to do banking online or anything like that. I wouldn't do that.*

*(NML) B: Cause you had all these visions...and everyone is paranoid about data protection and all this. And you can all the sudden go boom! Now what have I done, how do I get out of this? And what's why you can't really get a computer and have a play and do things on it and someone else other there, seeing you made a mistake, swoop, money gone straight away.*

*(NWA) H: Something that's out of your control once you've sort of, put out your data or your information and you sort of think, 'where's it gone?'*

*(NML) G: Professional people, doctors even, have been conned out of several thousand pound, what chance do I got?*

*(NML) R: I've had a paypal account and somebody got into and took money out of it.*

*(STA) R: I would never do banking online nor would my wife. Ever, ever. But my daughter's do. Because, I don't, I do not trust people.*

Others also mentioned, however, that the Surf's Up course helped them to realise both the need for security but also its presence in programmes they had previously been using, unaware of its existence.

*(AYL) S: I think that it has given me an idea that there is security. And the range of stuff is just mind-boggling....They showed us this on the internet, the first time if you look out for a lock or a shield. I didn't know that existed. I didn't know that it was a part of the set-up.*

*(STA) R: And we've got all the security, and we don't pay for it, we just upgrades itself, the AVG. That's all free now and that's enough for what we do.*

*(AYL) H: I don't think I've the confidence yet to be able to purchase things on the internet but hopefully you know, I'm still a bit, um, sort of unsure as to how safe all that is. But, you know, a few years ago, when people asked you to give your details on the phone and you think, no I'm not going to do that!*

#### 4.8 Frustration and looking to explore on their own

For all but one of the focus groups, the data was gathered at the participants' final Surf's Up sessions. Despite having significantly high staffing ratios (at two locations, it was three participants to two members of staff at the other sessions it was around 6 participants to two members of staff) participants were often still frustrated by how they were learning.

*(AYL) L: And I don't find it that difficult, but it's remembering. It's just so new to me I'm just thinking about everything.*

*(NWA) J: Because if, say, for instance, you know, mobile phones, fine. I've had one for as long as I can remember. Sat. nav in the car and that's fine. I have this block with the computer. And my younger daughter, she said, 'I told you once, you got it? All right, fine, move on.' So it's quite hard.*

*(STA) R: I find it very, very hard. I'm, always, normally always doing it wrong. And if she [librarian] wasn't there, I, I'm can never remember which thing I have to press to do a certain thing. I still find it very, very awkward....But I have gone on my own computer at home and after about five minutes, I have just had enough. I cannot do anything, so I turn it all off.*

*(STA) W: I still at times you've got so much on the screen at once you can't, ohhh, ahhh, I'll leave that and go onto something else.*

This frustration, however, was for some also coupled with a realisation of what the participants could use the internet for. In some cases, it was something of a revelation.

*(AYL) L: It's absolutely brilliant. You can go onto BBC iplayer and I tried it with my friend on my laptop on Monday, go the BBC iplayer and played back Panorama. If you didn't see Panorama, you put it in and you can see the last episode. It's absolutely brilliant!*

*(NML) G: Get information on or whatever, I can two or three times put someone's name in, put it in and learn all about them. That's something very, very good for that.*

*(NWA) Jt: Being on your own, it's opened up a new world!*

*(STA) W: I've achieved what I wanted to do, learn how to email and find m'way around and how to get on various sites and things. And, you know, I feel quite confident. I won't be approaching it going, 'ohhhhh.'*

*(NML) B. There's a lot in the money bit, that's absolutely. But you know, I can do a lot on the net without having to go on anything.*

*(AYL) H: Yes, I tried looking for some insurance, in fact, I came in on another day from the course and came in and did that. And that was very successful....but having all the pages because I did the research here, it gave me a lot of confidence to say, look, this company is offering, so and so, can you improve on your offer? And it worked!*

*(AYL) S: And I did go on the internet in our local library, which is Cromer. And saw a particular offer in a store in Norwich. And um, because I could not order it, so I phoned up the store and said look, 'online, blah, blah, blah.' And they said, okay, we'll match that as it's online. So I got a very good deal, plus cash back, plus a couple of extra lenses as part of a package. Which originally was only available online.*

#### **4.9 Geographical anomalies**

The four focus groups were located in different parts of Norfolk, with the largest library participating, the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library, in the main urban centre of Norfolk, the two market towns of Aylsham and North Walsham and the small village of Stalham. Interestingly, despite varying degrees of broadband accessibility and speed in Norfolk, this was not a significant barrier or problem, as it was only touched upon during the Aylsham focus group. Still, for this one couple, slow internet speeds were a barrier to using the internet at home and a significant frustration, as illustrated in this short dialogue between the focus group members.

*(AYL) H: Well, I think as I said earlier on, we did go on dial-up for a little bit when we got a computer. And that was just so slow.*

*(AYL) S: Always crashing*

*(AYL) H: Um, and we did, we did have a few attempts but really didn't sort of inspire us to continue.*

*(AYL) L: If anything, it probably put you off a bit!*

*(AYL) H: We'd had a go at doing some shopping when we were on dial-up and once again it took so long that we ended up having to make a phone call to say what are we doing wrong.*

*(AYL) S: It was a lengthy process and very frustrating. And I think BT, the telephone people, are, are have said, you know, we would be able, you know, to get some sort of speed but it won't be great. But it will be faster. It will be superior to dial-up, because of where we are situated.*

If anything, the more rural or isolated geographically the participants were, this then increased the likelihood they would want to be IT and internet literate, at least in the case of these focus groups.

*(AYL) S: We would like to shop, we would like to go on banking because we live in a particular village where we have to get in the car to go anywhere. So the bank is a journey, the library is a journey, shopping is a journey.*

*(STA) Jt: Well, I was basically...when I was left on my own I began to realise that I might need it, particularly, say, if I could get to the stage where I can no longer drive it might be useful to be able to order my shopping, from the supermarket and have it delivered to me. As I live in the village with no shops.*

Although, this was not strictly limited to rural isolation (although this person lived in a larger market town) as reflected by one man's health condition, which could occur in both rural and more urban areas.

*(NWA) D: Really, I'm more or less housebound, I very seldom go out, so it would just give me something extra to do, like.*

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

The research was conducted across four libraries within NLIS, bearing in mind different library and community sizes and locations. A mixed-methods approach was taken, a questionnaire, which was completed by nineteen participants across the four settings and four focus groups, in which seventeen attendees participated.

The questionnaire provided background information on the participants, such as their age, number of those that owned a mobile, computer or had internet access at home. The quantitative data also revealed that most participants did not have prior experience using computers and if they did, it was limited in its scope. In the short question portion of the questionnaire, some participants revealed their fears of 'doing something wrong' and many mentioned wanting basic skills to do more learning online on their own.

After running the four focus groups, the author compared the transcripts to see if any consistent themes emerged across the different settings. Many of the participants felt a sense of isolation because of their lack of skills and for some, a reliance on others to do anything online. People were frustrated by not having had any opportunity to go online previously, either at work or school and felt like the World Wide Web was 'everywhere', which was overwhelming to some. Participants were motivated by different factors, many citing being able to keep in touch with friends and family as a reason to get online. Many of the participants were frustrated by

their own lack of basic skills and at the same time. This frustration also extended, for some, to their lack of progress in relation to others who were more web savvy.

However, once some took the first step towards learning, they often mentioned how worthwhile and more confident they felt about being online. The Surf's Up courses were seen as taking some of the uncertainty and fear out of being online.

Participants often mentioned aspects of the internet that were particularly useful to them in their own lives, such as watching television online, browsing and searching for information. Despite this newfound confidence for some, most were still unsure about putting information online, either in the case of purchasing items or revealing personal data in an online format.

The focus groups were located in different locations within a variety of library and community sizes. For the more rural locations, there was a greater sense of isolation with regards to goods and services and an increased understanding of how the internet might help to overcome that. In addition, one of the more rural locations also spoke about the lack of broadband internet access.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data provided ample information by which to analyse the current Surf's Up programme, judge its efficacy within NLIS and also think about future recommendations regarding IT policy for older people and bridging the digital divides of the future.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Meaningful computer and internet access

One of the most striking aspects from the focus group data was the issue of access and understanding its meaning within the context of these Surf's Up participants. In the main, previous government policies focused on providing physical access to a computer with the internet, for example, the People's Network or to a certain extent, and the government's Race Online 2012, which seeks to create a 'truly networked nation' (Race Online 2012, n.d.). Within this study's cohort, 50% had a personal computer, 39% had a personal computer with internet access and 28% had used library computers. Disregarding the one person that owned a computer and also used library computers, this means that 61% of the participants had relatively easy access to a computer with internet access and this increased to 72% if all home personal computers were to get internet access. Although some members of the focus groups may not realise where they can access computers and the internet, this is in contrast to the Oxford Internet Institute claim in 2007 (Morris, Goldman and Brading, 2007) that 'only 4% of the British population lacks ready access to a place where they can use the Internet'.

Within this group, physical access did not appear to be as much of a problem, as only person specifically spoke about the cost implications of purchasing their own computer or the difficulty in getting access to one via a family member or the library. Instead, comments often reflected on Grant's (2007) research, which suggests that any kind of physical access is immaterial if the desire to use the internet is not 'meaningful' within the user's own life. This contrast can be seen within two different focus group members. For some, although the internet was relevant, it was not yet a need for them:

*(NML) C: Do I really need it? Do I really need it you've managed all your life without it?*

*(NML) G: I think I realised that it's [the internet] brilliant. I have a large garden in the summer, I'm quite happy to go out in my garden in the summer, not sit in here with the computer. And so, and at the moment I wouldn't even think about a laptop to be honest with you. Cause I couldn't justify it.*

While others had found a relevant need for internet access and their own computer at home:

*(AYL) L: It's absolutely brilliant. You can go onto BBC iplayer and I tried it with my friend on my laptop on Monday, got the BBC iplayer and played back Panorama. If you didn't see Panorama, you put it in and you can see the last episode! It's absolutely brilliant!!!*

What can be seen across the four focus groups was that the motivations to be online were varied and personal. In the more rural locations, the internet could be a lifeline:

*(NWA) Jt: Well, I was basically... when I was left on my own I began to realise that I might need it, particularly, say, if I could get to the stage where I can no longer drive it might be useful to be able to order my shopping, from the supermarket and have it delivered to me. As I live in the village with no shops.*

For others, it was keeping in touch with friends and family or something to do:

*(NWA) D: Really, I'm more or less housebound, I very seldom go out, so it would just give me something extra to do, like.*

*(AYL) H: And our niece has just gone to live in Sydney, Australia, so that's another motivation. To sort of contact her, email her, get pictures and things like that.*

And for some to simply feel included:

*(STA) L: Well, I felt that we needed to join the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And, things are becoming, so that, unless you are online, and got a computer you can't do so many things. And everybody seems to be using a computer now, so it just seemed a good idea to sort of get with everybody else.*

To be fair, these participants had the interest and motivation to enquire about courses and for many, a clear reason for wanting to be online. In that sense, their views may not then accurately represent the average non-user amongst the millions who have not gone online and perhaps have no intention of doing so (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Still, what was shown across the four focus groups was that the definition of 'meaningful' was very different depending on the person involved (Ferro, Helbig & Gil-Garcia, 2011). There is less research discussing the issues surrounding motivation (Eynon & Helsper, 2010; van Dijk, 2006) and fewer policy initiatives on how to motivate people to get online.

What the comments from the focus groups seem to suggest is that the fundamental issue with getting reluctant or unconfident older people online is that the deficit in physical access is less important to overcome than the need for motivation to be online in the first place.

## 5.2 The digital divide gulf(s)

A national campaign such as Race Online 2012 raises awareness and provides access but in relation to the findings within this study, questions remain as to whether suitable computer skills have and will make enough people digitally independent, and, in fact, whether this is what the average older, non-internet user truly desires.

It seems that some government initiatives or campaigns have more 'worthy' goals of getting people digitally connected. Many articles about the digital divide focus their arguments in 'gulfs' that are occurring between the haves and the have-nots or the movement of government policies and services online leaving vast swaths of the public unable to go about their day-to-day lives (Asthana & McVeigh, 2010; Olphert, Damodaran & May, 2007; Foley, Alfonso, Brown & Fisher, 2003). Although some in the focus groups spoke of the difficulties of typing, which would presumably create a 'gulf' between skill-sets of those online or not, in the case of most focus group participants, these issues were not particularly relevant or a concern at the moment.

This lack of interest in internet tools such as Web 2.0, a more interactive format online, by most of the focus group members suggests that further 'gulfs' may occur, supporting research in this area (Kinney, 2010; Wakefield, 2005) but that for many basic internet users, this was not as much of a concern, at least at present. Instead participants focused their learning needs on things that were relevant to them personally, one speaking of the joy of going onto Skype:

*(STA) R: the only that we're doing, at home now, is we can talk to my son...and granddaughters in Spain.*

Others mentioned the cost-savings that might occur online but really, their interest was in being able to browse:

*(NML) B: Do a lot on the net without having to go on anything.*

To a certain extent they all felt 'left behind' but not necessarily in the same way that government or various organisations said they were or in how they were best targeted. Feeling left behind was an issue but related to them personally, depending on their needs.



It is important to remember, then, that a lot of what goes on online for those that are both 'digitally excluded' but also those that are online every day could be classified as meaningless surfing, browsing shops, social networking; but potentially enjoyable and inclusive at the same time. At least within these focus groups, most of the participants would be classified as part of the digital divide and though they recognised this to a certain extent, their day-to-day lives were not made detrimental, at least in their minds, by not banking online, having a Facebook account or downloading government forms from the internet.

### **5.3 Age in relation to feeling left behind**

The previous sections touch upon the viewpoint that many of the Surf's Up participants felt left behind, often because of their age. As official government figures indicate, older people are not represented as widely online as their younger counterparts (Office of National Statistics, 2011; Society of Chief Librarians (Wales), 2010). The participants often felt that their lack of computer skills was a direct result of not being exposed to the internet at work or school and/or in relation to their age and other generations' IT competence.

*(NWA) Jt: I mean, they all learnt in school the young ones, we didn't...*

*(STA) L: Whereas, the younger generation they're just brought up with it.*

This correlates to findings where research found that older people 'miss out' in direct relation to their age and exposure to IT and again when services move online (Morris, Goodman & Brading, 2007; Olphert, Damodaran & May, 2005).

Being older for the participants also presented issues that for many older people can be age specific, like taking time for things to 'sink in' and remembering what to do, for example. There was a feeling for some that it was simply more difficult to learn basic IT skills when you were older:

*(STA) R: But I presume if I carried on at home, with the wife as well, then I'd much likely get a little better. Cause she said to me, 'you have learned a bit. You, you know what to do there like.' And I said, yeah, but that doesn't seem a lot to me I can't get on it like my, one of my daughters and they zooming across it, you know, like you were saying, yours. I don't have and I suppose you're fast on the computer as well.*

*(NML) R: We were born too early, too early! I'm glad that I'm not going to live much longer. Because, I don't want to think of all the work involved!*

These feelings are similar to research findings, which found it took older people significantly longer to do certain tasks online, like finding information, compared with other age counterparts (Hargittai, 2002, 2003, as cited in van Dijk, 2005). This is also compounded by physical issues that impact more profoundly on older people, like poor eyesight and dexterity issues like arthritis.

#### **5.4 Basic skills as a gateway**

As seen in this research project, having access to the internet and the motivation to be online did not necessarily correlate to the extent to which the users themselves could seek out information or use the internet with ease. In many ways, the real barrier to internet usage amongst this cohort was the perceived or real lack of computer skills, the lack of basic IT literacy that was the real and meaningful deterrent for new, older IT students. Participants were often afraid of doing something 'wrong' or harming their computer as a result of their incompetence:

*NWA (Je): But with me, what stopped me was someone had said they was always half afraid of it. I said to my son, can I, sort of, by pressing the wrong button break it in any way? And he said, 'no'.*

*(NML) J: And you click and think, where is it? Where is it?*

There was a significant amount of reflection about the difficulty of knowing how to use a computer in the first place, understanding how to get started.

*(AYL) L: Just lack of knowledge, I think. I just didn't have a clue. Um, I've not used, I've not used a computer for work so it was an alien being. That was it, really, for me. Not having a clue what to do.*

Within this issue of basic skills access, it was quite apparent across the four groups how important and relevant having basic skills meant to the participants and that without these particular skills, they would be unsure how to carry on. Many of the participants seemed to demonstrate a direct correlation between basic skills and confidence. This is consistent with Ferro, Helbig and Gil-Garcia's (2011) research that indicated that a kind of 'initial inertia' existed for true beginners, and that

overcoming this was the crucial first step to getting online. One participant seems to personify this exactly when he stated:

*(NML) G: I think I've achieved the objective to get on the internet. It's a big, big step.*

For these participants themselves but also the wider older people population in Norfolk, it might be that obtaining a few basic skills will then exponentially increase the want or need to carry on exploring online and the confidence and initial skills to do so. Again, a participant directly reflecting this sentiment:

*(NWA) W: I'd had a very brief smattering of it [going online], nothing like this to really get in to.*

The basic skills learned on Surf's Up, for example, might also combat what some authors feel are further digital divides (Kinney, 2010; Wakefield, 2005; Gurstein, 2003), between those that know and others that know even more. However, there was a certain limit to what basic skills would enable the participants to then accomplish, as many were quite happy to search, email or even Skype, but when questioned about purchasing online, without the assistance of staff or a family member, for many it would be quite difficult or even impossible.

*(NML) G: For a start, I wouldn't buy it.*

*(STA) R: I'd ask my wife [to buy something online]. And she'd do it. Or ask one of you.*

With many goods and services moving online or better prices to be found exclusively online, it is a reasonable assumption that many people with low IT literacy and a reluctance to spend money online will be impacted significantly by these changes. At the moment, this does not appear to be a significant concern for the focus group participants but with time, further digital divides may emerge or deepen in this regard.

## **5.5 Importance of qualitative data**

Even in this small scale study it was apparent the impact and efficacy accrued in gathering qualitative data versus quantitative data. The focus groups further revealed their motivations, their hesitations and what they truly felt they had

accomplished. A pre and post questionnaire might have, for example, revealed that a particular participant felt uncomfortable emailing at the beginning of the course but achieved competency by the end. Without any qualitative data to associate with this it does not explain the journey that particular person took or their motivations or difficulties encountered by doing so. For example, from the quantitative data gathered it was revealed that 63% of the participants felt comfortable emailing or that 89% said they felt comfortable searching online. Yet when questioned about being comfortable online directly, the answer was different.

STA focus group:

*Author: So there wasn't any sort of comfortableness about being online before Surf's Up?*

*(STA) Group: Chorus of nos.*

AYL focus group:

*Author: Um, so I guess what I was asking, was, what things were you comfortable doing online before Surf's Up?*

*(AYL): Nothing really.*

The discrepancy or the richness of the response between a quantitatively and a qualitatively gathered responses, was not just limited to one question. For example, when 'Je' from the NWA focus group was asked about why they would feel uncomfortable purchasing items online in the questionnaire 'Je' responded:

*(NWA) Je: I would not be happy buying anything or internet banking.*

When asked a similar question within the focus group, 'Je' explained more fully:

*(NWA) Je: I'd have to be absolutely confident that I was doing right I'd be afraid that I'd do something wrong. Something had gone somewhere that it shouldn't.*

This correlates with van Dijk (2006) and Eynon and Helsper's (2010) assertions that there is a strong need for more qualitative data to add to existing quantitative data but also to avoid making too many broad assessments, that then lead to policies that reflect those generalisations.

Caution must be exercised here, however, as this was a small-scale research project. Still, similar results were duplicated across four focus groups, and though

quantitative data revealed a bit about the group itself, even a brief focus group gave a window onto the fears, achievements and similarities for participants across the county. In addition, simply asking 'anything else' does not necessarily elicit as full and rich evidence as a discussion nor are people able to compare and commiserate in the same way as they could in a focus group setting.

## **5.6 Role of public libraries**

It is also worth noting that many participants spoke of the difficulty of trying to learn independently when often it is faster to have it completed for them and/or the issues and frustrations with learning from a more experienced friend or family member.

*(STA) W: Well I had but only what my daughter told me. And it's so quick that you can't take it in and she hasn't got the temperament to...*

*(NWA) J: Having things done for me, you know. Everyone was doing things for me. And saying, 'it'll be quicker if I do it' says the other person, 'I'm much quicker, don't worry, I'll do it.'*

This brings up two issues with the dilemma facing many of people over 65 that have never been online or those that are targeted by computer courses and training for older people provided by public libraries, similar to Surf's Up.

First, public libraries can act as a direct foil to the frustration of learning from or having friends and family members do tasks for them. Courses like Surf's Up provide a consistent, experienced approach with additional staff where participants learn through doing it themselves. This was reiterated by many of the focus group cohort, that the basic skills gained while attending Surf's Up had and would lead to more independent learning and doing online activities.

Second, the issue is that even with nearly twelve hours of tuition, for many, this was not enough to boost their confidence sufficiently to be as independent as many of the government initiatives or campaigners to move services online might want or demand. Participants spoke of still finding it 'awkward' and not being able to 'find' what they wanted without assistance. Moreover, Surf's Up is unique to NLIS and is only part of a four year BIG Lottery funding stream. This then raises questions about its efficacy in the long-term, both within NLIS but also, and perhaps, to a greater

extent, within the wider context of local government cuts and library closures nationwide (Page, 2011).

In this small cohort, the participants have nearly unanimously suggested they have benefited and could benefit from more courses. At least within the NLIS setting, after six sessions of Surf's Up, this is the end of the formalised learning, with some libraries piloting volunteer schemes for IT 'champions' to host drop-in sessions for those that seek or require further assistance. Within the wider milieu of adult learning, both van Dijk (2005) and Schuller and Watson (2009) argue that significantly more funding, and a shift in current adult education provision policies needs to be dramatically altered to meet the demand of the aging public, which is reflected in the opportunities provided and skills gained through courses like NLIS' Surf's Up.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This study demonstrated that while physical access to computers and the internet, which has long been the preferred and favoured method of government policies and programmes (Choudrie, Grey & Tsitsianis, 2010; Hardie-Boys, 2004) aimed at closing the digital divide is important and needs to be addressed, for many of the focus group participants, it was a lack of motivation and basic skills that prevented initial and further IT learning. Furthermore, it was this 'skills inertia' (Ferro, Helbig & Gil-Garcia, 2011) that left many feeling left behind digitally. This was exacerbated by many participants feeling at a disadvantage because of their age, both because of a sense that they 'missed out' on learning, either in the workplace or in their own educational opportunities but also because of physical, age-related issues, like sight, dexterity and memory.

Many focus group members demonstrated that gaining basic skills gave them the confidence to learn more and for some, learn independently. Much of the rich data was gained via qualitative data, made obvious by the fact that even a small amount of actual conversations could be a rich and diverse source of information, far more than the quantitative responses gathered. The setting of the Surf's Up course within a public library and the role of public libraries in providing digital skills addresses the

future viability of vital courses such as these and also the future adult education and computer skills in general.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Surf's Up and the digital divide**

By using the Surf's up participants as the research cohort in which to better understand whether or not the digital divide can be closed, this research project allows those impacted directly by the digital divide to speak for themselves and possibly influence similar such programmes that impact on older people in a wider context. Moreover, the project's existence across NLIS' forty-seven branch libraries means that there were sufficient possibilities to find a diverse group of participants in both urban and rural areas in which to provide their opinions both on their own learning online but also issues and concerns with the internet in general.

The aim of this project was to identify suitable groups to work with and also to give wider scope to the viewpoints of those participating in the Surf's Up computer courses, beyond the basic questionnaire that was currently being used to meet funding aims and objectives, rather than significantly alter the existing course outline or look for similarities in opinions and viewpoints. It was hoped that by working directly with those impacted by the digital divide and soliciting their opinions on the issue it might reveal suggestions for future programmes and initiatives.

One of the objectives for this project was to identify and gather data from four diverse Surf's Up locations. Though there was an element of 'choosing' the locations, as all of NLIS' forty-seven branches participate, the author was limited by the start and end dates of the six-week sessions as well as her own full-time work commitments. Even so, it was felt that the locations chosen would adequately reflect both the range and scope of the people taking part but also urban and rural settings and potential viewpoints.

Though there is a significant population of older people that are impacted by the digital divide, there is little qualitative research in this area, with significant funding and projects often based upon various statistics regarding older people, rather than their own personal experiences online. In that sense, there was definite scope within this research project to discover the viewpoints, opinions and concerns of participants in an on-going project. There was also the potential to both alter later



Surf's Up sessions programmes but possibly influence similar such projects in other areas of adult learning aimed at older people over the age of 65.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

Prior research revealed that there was a reliance on quantitative data, with little qualitative research with regards to older people and their experience online. Moreover, there was disagreement as to the true definition of the digital divide and to what extent which aspect of the digital divide needed to be addressed, for example, was physical access more of an issue rather than computer skills themselves. There was also some discussion regarding whether a digital divide could ever be closed, because as skills were achieved in one digital domain, particularly for older people, there were other skills that needed to be obtained.

By using the readily accessible group of participants, there was ample opportunity and rich data to be found. In that sense, using the qualitative approach, via focus groups in particular, allowed both the participants to more fully express their views and opinions but also provided the author with more data by which to adequately consider future policy regarding the digital divide and other similar programmes in a public library setting.

As significant data was collected, in such small focus groups, it is felt that the information gathered from the groups can actively describe a 'typical' older person's experience with learning to use computers and the internet later in life. In that sense, the objective of discovering a group to work with and then better understanding what sorts of accomplishments had true meaning and value for the participants, was very achievable.

Analysis indicated that some of the data and viewpoints revealed in the qualitative research did not always correspond with the quantitative data from the same participants. For example, when asked how comfortable they were online, some participants clearly stated one thing on their questionnaire but were actually feeling something quite different. Though there is a certain amount of unreliability amongst the focus groups as well, as some participants may not have spoken as much as others, or may have felt pressure in the presence of their fellow participants to

exaggerate what they have learned, in the main, it was felt that the respondents were much more honest and reflective speaking together as a group, rather than responding to rote questions.

Another breakthrough was that even small focus groups could elicit significant, rich data. It could then be argued that within the current Surf's Up courses, time should be given to the Community Librarians running the course to run similar focus groups in their own settings and then transcribe the sessions. If this research project was to be replicated, it would be interesting to extend it across significantly more settings, to see if similar results occurred.

Moreover, as of September 2011, the Surf's Up project was only one year into a four-year programme, and follow-up focus groups in the proceeding years might better inform how older people's learning skills and needs are changing as one digital divide regarding access closes but another potentially emerges with regard to certain online tools and skills. However, given significant cuts within NLIS, and a reduction of Community Librarians positions over the same timeframe as the Surf's Up project, it is unlikely that attention will be focused in this area, and understandably to an extent, as the librarians themselves do a significant amount of work outside of computer skills tuition.

It also seems significant that given the time, attention and small groups used within the Surf's Up that some participants still did not feel completely at ease with exploring certain aspects of the World Wide Web on their own or participating in various online marketplaces or Web 2.0 functions such as Facebook or blogging. It is questionable, then, whether certain government initiatives will succeed when they are based on a volunteer-led model, like the Race Online 2012 programme or short-term funding, that may be unable to provide the participants with as intensive tuition or attention as they demand or require.

From this small research project, it is apparent that there is still a significant demand for computer and internet access and courses, despite the existence of the People's Network and the decreasing cost of both computers and broadband internet access, particularly amongst older people who missed out on IT training either at school or in the workplace. It is also obvious that programmes like Surf's Up are successful, in the sense that they build confidence, allow participants to gain a sense of purpose

online, and over time, enable them to discover and explore the internet with guidance and then independently. What is also clear is that for many of the older people that are impacted by the digital divide, there is a need for more than an internet address and a self-guided course to enable them to exist independently online, to gain the skills that will be needed as many goods, services and information moves online. What remains to be seen is what role public libraries will have in future digital divide programmes and initiatives. If the relative success and appreciation of Surf's Up by its own participants is any indication, there is significant scope for libraries to combat the digital divide. Should time, attention and funding be given to computer and internet access and courses for older people within a public library setting, there is capacity for libraries to enable and empower with regards to how best to help older people overcome their fears and get online.

Word Count: 14340

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## Surf's Up Participant Questionnaire

**Name:**

**Age:**

1. Do you own a computer <i>(Please tick your answer)</i>	YES	NO
2. Would you like to get a computer?		
3. Do you own a mobile phone?		
4. Do you have internet access via a home computer or mobile phone?		
5. Would you like to get Internet access at home?		
6. Have you used library computers before?		

7. Where did you find out about Surf's Up?

8. What would you like to accomplish on this course?

9. Have you used computers before? What did you use them for?

*Complete the following sentences:*

10. Things that I haven't done online that I'd like to are:

**11. I would feel more confident about going online if:**

**12. Things that make me nervous about going online are:**

**13. How would you describe your previous experience with computers (eg: I have one but someone always helps me with it; I just bought one but don't know how to use it)**

**14. I would feel comfortable doing the following online:**

*Please tick all that are appropriate.*

Internet banking

☐

Buying something

☐

Emailing

☐

Paying bills

☐

Searching

☐

Doing a course

☐

**15. Please explain what things you feel comfortable doing online** *(Example: I feel okay emailing because it isn't that difficult.)*

**16. Please explain what things you feel uncomfortable doing online** *(Example: I don't want to buy anything in case it could get stolen.)*

**Thank you!**

## Appendix B: Focus group introduction

My name is XXXXX XXXXXXXX and I am a Community Librarian for Norfolk County Council and I am also a Master's student at Aberystwyth University, studying an MScEcon in Information and library studies by distance learning. As part of my course, I am undertaking a research project under the supervision of Dr. Anoush Simon. This project is investigating how Norfolk Library and Information Service is attempting to close the digital divide through courses like Surf's Up and how we can tailor them to meet the future needs of people like yourself.

Your group was selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to me. You are all over 60 and have some computer skills but are interested in learning more. I am interested in your views because other people over 60 may have similar views. There are no right or wrong answers, only different points of view. Your views may be used to help with this course and other courses in the future but your specific names will not be used in any way and will remain confidential.

With regards to the recording device, when making a contribution, I would be very grateful if you could speak clearly, and please refrain from speaking across another contributor.

## Appendix C: Focus group questions

Opening Question: Round robin answered by everyone

- **Can each of you please tell me your name, age and how you found out about Surf's Up**

Introductory questions:

- **What was the turning point for you that you thought-I want to go online?**
- **What did you want to accomplish on this course (what did you want to achieve?)**
- **What things previously stopped you from using computers and the Internet?**

Transition questions:

- **If you went online before this course, who helped you to do that?**
- **What things were you comfortable doing online before Surf's Up?**
- **What things did you want to try on Surf's Up courses?**
- **What sort of misconceptions did you have about going online before this course?**

Key questions:

- **People often mention that they are nervous about putting personal details online. What made you feel this way?**
- **How would you react if you had to start purchasing things online?**
- **What do you think you've achieved on Surf's Up?**
- **If you could change anything about the course, what would it be?**

Ending questions

- **If you were trying to encourage someone who was reluctant to go online, what would you say?**
- **Why do you think older people in particular should go online?**

## **Appendix D: Questionnaire and project introduction**

### **Introduction to the questionnaire:**

Good morning. My colleague XXXXX XXXXXXXX is a Community Librarian for the Norwich area. She wants to find out more about how you feel about using computers and going online. Your group was selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to me. You are all over 60 and have some computer skills but are interested in learning more. I am interested in your views because other people over 60 may have similar views. There are no right or wrong answers, only different points of view. Your views may be used to help with this course and other courses in the future but your specific names will not be used in any way and will remain confidential. In a few weeks time she will return to again ask you more about your views in a focus group.

### **Surf's Up and the Digital Divide: An Analysis of how Norfolk Library and Information Services' Surf's Up computer courses can bridge the digital gap amongst its aging population**

#### **Invitation to complete a Questionnaire**

My name is XXXXX XXXXXXXX and I am a Master's student at Aberystwyth University, studying an MScEcon in Information and library studies by distance learning. As part of my course, I am undertaking a research project under the supervision of Dr. Anoush Simon. This project is investigating how Norfolk Library and Information Service is attempting to close the digital divide through courses like Surf's Up and how we can tailor them to meet the future needs of people like yourself.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to help me in this research, by completing the attached Questionnaire.

Before you decide whether or not to complete the Questionnaire, it is important that you understand:

- a) why the research is being done
- b) what it will involve

Please take time to read the following information carefully. If any of the information below is unclear or if you would like more information about this research project and what it involves, then please contact me (my contact details are listed at the end of this letter).

All the information about your participation in this study will be kept confidential (details about how this will be done are included in Part 2 of this letter).

#### **Part 1 Why am I doing this research/study: what is its purpose?**

The title of this project is: Surf's Up and the Digital Divide: An Analysis of how Norfolk Library and Information Services' computer courses can bridge the digital gap amongst its aging population. I am undertaking this research project as part of master's degree. The findings of the project will be used to better understand the needs of people on Surf's Up courses and try and anticipate what digital needs you may have in the future. You can see from the attached *Questionnaire* that I would like to find out about your fears and concerns with using computers and the Internet as well as when and how you use computers.



## Part 2 What does the study involve/what is the conduct of the study?

You have been contacted because I would like to work with different Surf's Up groups across Norfolk, in a variety of locations. I chose your library because I am looking at different sized libraries in Norwich and Norfolk.

Before you complete the *Questionnaire*, please note the following procedures about this study:

1. **Duration:** Completing the *Questionnaire* should take about 10 minutes of your time.
2. **Confidentiality:** All the information you give us will be treated confidentially. Both the *conversation* and the *information* you provide will be completely confidential and treated confidentially by the interviewer/researcher.
3. **Anonymity:** All interviews will be anonymous and personal data removed at the transcription stage. No individuals will be identified in our results. Any direct quotes included in the report (that is, quotes of the things recorded in the interview), will be used selectively and anonymously (that is, no one will be able to attribute/link the words to you).
4. **Data security:** The information will be kept securely, and for only as long as necessary to: a) analyse the research data and b) report on the research and its findings.
5. A full report and a summary of the research findings will be available via email from myself, or a paper copy if requested.
6. **Consent:** If you complete and return the *Questionnaire*, then I will assume that you have given your *Consent* to take part in this study. That is,
  - i. you have read and understood the information in this letter about the study.
  - ii. you can contact me (via my contact details listed below) if you have any questions or concerns about the *Questionnaire* or the study.
  - iii. you understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any reason and without any of your rights being affected.
  - iv. you understand that your responses will be treated confidentially and in confidence by the researcher.
  - v. you understand that your responses will be treated anonymously.
  - vi. you allow me to use your direct quotes (that is, statements you might write on the questionnaire) in the study's report/write-up.

Thank you for your time,  
XXXXX XXXXXXXX  
Community Librarian  
Earlham Library  
Colman Road  
Norwich NR4 7HG  
XXXXX.XXXXXXX@norfolk.gov.uk

## Appendix F: Consent form

### Consent form

**Title of project:** Master's Dissertation: Surf's Up and the Digital Divide: An Analysis of how Norfolk Library and Information Services' Surf's Up computer courses can help bridge the digital divide amongst its aging population

**Name of researcher/s:** XXXXX XXXXXXXX

**Project authority:** This research project is being undertaken as part of a Master's in Library and Information Studies from Aberystwyth University.

**Please tick**

1. I have read and understood the information letter for participants and a researcher has explained the study to me. ☐
2. I have received enough information about what my role involves. ☐
3. I understand that my decision to consent is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason; and I know that this will not affect my course. ☐
4. I consent to participate in this study about: Surf's Up and the Digital Divide: An Analysis of how Norfolk Library and Information Services' Surf's Up computer courses can help close the digital divide amongst its aging population ☐

<b>Name of participant (IN BLOCK LETTERS)</b>	<b>Signature</b>
<b>Name of researcher (IN BLOCK LETTERS)</b> <b>RESEARCHER</b>	<b>Signature</b> <i>Researcher</i>

**Please return this Consent Form to:**

XXXXX XXXXXXXX  
Community Librarian  
Earlham Library  
Colman Road  
Norwich NR4 7HG

## Appendix G: Questionnaire spreadsheet

		Have you used computers before?	Things that I haven't done online that I'd like to are?	I would feel more confident about going online if:	Things that make me nervous about going online	How would you describe previous experience		Please explain why comfortable	Please explain why uncomfortable
NWA	What would you like to accomplish?	What did you use them for?					I would feel comfortable		
D	to be able to use a computer to some extent	No	No answer	I knew how to use it	Did not know how to	Have just got one but don't know how to use it	Searching, buying something, paying bills	No answer	No answer
Jt	How to use the internet	No	Explore the internet	I understand enough about it	Making mistakes and security	I have never used one and feel so ignorant	emailing, searching, doing a course	I think I would like to learn to do this	I think I would feel uncomfortable doing anything where security would be a risk

## Appendix H: Main themes for individual library

### Aylsham Library main themes:

- Feeling disadvantaged not being online. Not able to find contact number only online.
- Called it 'crunch time' to start going online
- Basic skills on computer makes you nervous but you need to learn more
- Feeling left behind
- Wanting 'basic skills' to move forward
- Not nervous but need some 'hand-holding' initially to build confidence
- Feel isolated/missing out on learning more because not online
- Wanting more information from online
- Keeping in touch with people abroad and elsewhere
- Not knowing where to start
- Fear of technology (doing something wrong), losing data to ether/worried about safety of details online
- Currently have to use car to go everywhere, computer could help with that
- Dial-up so slow
- Not knowing what to do meant being online took a long longer
- Watching tv online is good
- Purchasing online-you could get a better deal
- Looking for deals online could give you confidence when buying
- Course meant-feeling motivated to learn more
- Felt supported to move forward with learning
- Liked learning how computer could keep details safe (shield)
- Rather not buy online but would later
- Feel 'normal' shops will always be there. Like to touch, see what buying
- Being online is a connection/allows connection with world as getting older, need to think about mobility as they get older

## Appendix I: Main themes for all focus groups

### AYL 10 main points

1. Feeling disadvantaged not being online
2. Feeling left behind
3. Wanting 'basic skills' to move forward
4. Keeping in touch with people abroad and elsewhere
5. Not knowing where to start
6. Not nervous but needing 'hand-holding' initially to build confidence
7. Fear of technology (doing something wrong), losing data to ether/worried about safety of details online
8. Being online is a connection/allows connection with world as getting older
9. Course meant feeling motivated to learn more
10. Felt supported to move forward with learning
11. Rather not buy online but would later

### STA 10 main points

1. Starting out with no skills is hard
2. Worried about being left behind
3. Being scared of being online and computers
4. Family members trying to teach but too fast/not patient/easier to allow others to do it for them
5. Want to talk to family members abroad
6. Would never feel confident enough to purchase online
7. More confident after learning basics
8. With basic skills able to move forward
9. Still find it difficult if not someone around to help them
10. Harder to learn when older
11. Difficult if no PC in work/life before and it's up to this point with no computers

### NWA 10 main points

1. Missing out not being online
2. Felt isolated not being online
3. Someone in their family was online they want to do it themselves
4. Could keep in touch with people online
5. Not online before because not interested
6. Difficult to learn when other people do it for you/do it faster
7. Frustration/not sure what to do/worried that something will go wrong
8. Feel practice will help
9. Nervous about where data goes online
10. Would purchase something online with help

### NML main points

1. Feel left out
2. See other family members doing it want to do it too.
3. Up until now had others do it for them/wait for others to be around for them to do it
4. Want to use internet for contacting family members
5. Nervous about information you put online
6. Feel more confident after course
7. Glad they have taken first step to get online/happy to go online and feel confident to try and look around
8. Still find it difficult
9. Not sure if computers/internet is relevant to them in their life
10. Young people are so fast
11. Nervous about details online/losing money

## Appendix J: Coding of themes

### AYL 10 main points

1. Feeling disadvantaged not being online
2. Feeling left behind
3. Wanting 'basic skills' to move forward
4. Keeping in touch with people abroad and elsewhere
5. Not knowing where to start
6. Not nervous but needing 'hand-holding' initially to build confidence
7. Fear of technology (doing something wrong), losing data to ether/worried about safety of details online
8. Being online is a connection/allows connection with world as getting older
9. Course meant feeling motivated to learn more
10. Felt supported to move forward with learning
11. Rather not buy online but would later

### STA 10 main points

1. Starting out with no skills is hard
2. Worried about being left behind
3. Being scared of being online and computers
4. Family members trying to teach but too fast/not patient/easier to allow others to do it for them
5. Want to talk to family members abroad
6. Would never feel confident enough to purchase online
7. More confident after learning basics
8. With basic skills able to move forward
9. Still find it difficult if not someone around to help them
10. Harder to learn when older
11. Difficult if no PC in work/life before and it's up to this point with no computers

### NWA 10 main points

1. Missing out not being online
2. Felt isolated not being online
3. Someone in their family was online they want to do it themselves
4. Could keep in touch with people online
5. Not online before because not interested
6. Difficult to learn when other people do it for you/do it faster
7. Frustration/not sure what to do/worried that something will go wrong
8. Feel practice will help
9. Nervous about where data goes online
10. Would purchase something online with help

### NML main points

1. Feel left out
2. See other family members doing it want to do it too.
3. Up until now had others do it for them/wait for others to be around for them to do it
4. Want to use internet for contacting family members
5. Nervous about information you put online
6. Feel more confident after course
7. Glad they have taken first step to get online/happy to go online and feel confident to try and look around
8. Still find it difficult
9. Not sure if computers/internet is relevant to them in their life
10. Young people are so fast
11. Nervous about details online/losing money

## Appendix K: Quotations within themes

### Focus groups by theme with quotes

- 12. Feeling disadvantaged not being online**
- 13. Feeling left behind**
- 14. Worried about being left behind**
- 15. Missing out not being online**
- 16. Feel left out**
- 17. See other family members doing it want to do it too.**

(AYL) L: Sigh, because I realised I'm getting really disadvantaged not being able to use a computer. I've never used a computer in my life. And I knew that if I didn't make the effort to do something about it now, I never would. And, and, it's getting to the stage where everything is, computer, website, addresses, everything. You can't even get a telephone number sometimes when you want to get something. So crunch time! (Laughing)

(AYL) H: Uh, yes, and, and the same reasons really, that you know, everything that you pick up, nowadays it says, go online, do this online, you know, it, it just seems to be, the way forward and a, as everybody says, you will get left behind. If you don't, you know, get enough skills. I think, you know, once you have the basic skills, it gives you the confidence to carry on. Um, but sometimes if you do things wrong all the time, it makes you feel, argh, I just can't do this. But you need to go back and start things from the beginning and then, uh, hopefully move on.

(AYL) S: So I, I'm the only one on the course that doesn't have it, so my tutor gives me filthy looks when she has to print out the stuff. And giving me the stuff she is sending to everyone else. But not really, ummm! And I'd like to be, you know, I'd like to have access to some of the stuff that is being done on the computer for, for, photography. And that's one of the motivations.

(NML)B: Everything for me was on the television and everything was www.com

(NML) B: And I thought, the whole world is stopping at www. It's a new world. Everything is stopping and you don't have to shop at marks and spencers, now it's www.marksandspencers!

(NML) G: I think, I saw my daughter and my other children using it and I realised that it's a brilliant medium, really, but I also appreciate it can be a bit of a time waster if you're not careful.

(NWA) H: There's so much that you can't do if you're not online. Um, that's the main reason I,. I decided to come and have lessons.

(NWA) Jt: Um, well, I was basically... when I was left on my own I began to realise that I might need it, particularly, say, if I could get to the stage where I can no longer drive it might be useful to be able to order my shopping, from the supermarket and have it delivered to me. As I live in the village with no shops.